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ABSTRACT

Typical students in a college remedial reading program have self-concept problems springing from several sources, including peers, teachers, and parents, that can hinder their chances for success. Teachers can set up circumstances in which students feel some of the emotions that confident people feel. Weekly sheets for the planning of goals and for recording feedback progress toward those goals can be designed to lead students to develop some qualities of confidence. Students fill out their own goal sheets, which keeps them notified of what they are trying to accomplish, thus alleviating frustration. The goals should be as follows: (1) a productive way to deal with a challenge or problem, (2) small enough that the student knows he or she can do it in the time available, and (3) definite enough that the student knows whether he or she has met them. On the weekly feedback sheets, students record personal feedback as well as feedback from others on their efforts. The usefulness of such feedback varies from little to something that shows students the contradictions in their goals, their unwillingness to spend time often enough to meet those goals, or the absurdity of trying to please too many people when there is no need to be concerned about pleasing. These weekly sheets can help students learn to structure their time, set and reach goals, accept pressure and stress, and spur themselves into action. (HTH)

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A METHOD FOR INDIRECTLY TEACHING IMPROVED SELF-CONCEPT IN COLLEGE READING CLASSES

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A Method for Indirectly Teaching Improved Self-Concept in College Reading Classes

In a college reading class, a weekly sheet for the planning of goals and a weekly sheet for feedback on the progress toward those goals can be designed to lead the student to develop some of the qualities of the person with a good self-concept. The improvement in self-concept is thus taught indirectly, without mention or labels.

The traits of the person with a good self-concept can be used to shape the design of the two sheets. Using a standard list of traits, I made the two sheets draw the student into doing and feeling some of the things that people who think positively of themselves do.

To understand why and how the sheets are used, we need to consider the importance of building self-concept in college reading classes, reasons for teaching the improvement of self-concept indirectly, and the source and content of the desired traits. Concerning the goal and feedback sheets, we need to examine the reasons for their use, the purposes of their parts, and some examples of student response to them.

Importance of Building Self-Concept in College Reading Classes

The typical student in a remedial reading program in college has self-concept problems springing from several sources, including his peers, his teachers and his parents. His peers remind him of his academic shortcomings by either doing better or by failing. His teachers have reminded him of those shortcomings for several years in the public schools and continue to remind him by giving him low grades. His parents probably do not expect him to do well, even before he goes to college, and the student senses their expectations. In short, a history of failure has set an expectation for more failure.

The wedge of doubt cuts away the student's chances for success. We all know from our experiences that we cannot do something until we think that we can do it. When we hang wallpaper, doubt will give us lumps, overlaps and wrinkles. When we swim, doubt will do us in. And, it will do in our marginal students, as well.

Ironically, the semester whisks past before the student has time to realize how far he is behind. Frustration crushes the chance for the feedback the student needs to improve his self-concept. Thus, we reading teachers are caught in a triple bind. We need to be concerned with the student's self-concept; we need to help the student with his reading problems quickly enough to salvage the semester; we need to build the student's self-concept while he fails because we both are running out of time. And yet, even though we do not have enough time to do either, we must try to do both, for neither can be done without the other.

Reasons for the Indirect Teaching of Self-Concept Improvement

It is absurd to attempt to teach people how to think positively about themselves by telling them how wonderful it is to feel self-assured. It is like teaching someone to use a handsaw by showing him scraps of lumber. We can't tell people that they should and therefore do feel self-confident, especially when they are failing or fighting frustration in something as conspicuous as a semester of college. We can, however, set up the circumstances in which the person feels some of the emotions about himself that self-confident people feel. When he feels them, he knows it, and does not need to be told that he does.

Also, when we try to teach the improvement of the self-concept by talking about it and by telling how important it is, we make our students feel self-conscious by suggesting that they do not accept themselves. To suggest that

people do not accept themselves is to suggest that there are obvious reasons why they should not.

Source and Content of Guidelines on Desired Traits

Because I have been interested in self-concept improvement for my students for several years, I have read many pieces on the topic. The guidelines I chose for constructing the goal and feedback sheets seem typical of their kind. They are a simple, easy-to-apply list of traits of the self-confident person. Donald Thomas presents them in "The Positive View of Self," pp. 24-29, NAASP Bulletin, Vol. 60, No. 403, November, 1976. They are as follow:

1. The ability to understand that the human person has more powers and capabilities than he ever uses.
2. The ability to see the big picture. ("We must develop a sense of wholeness with our total life (the sum total of our successes and failures), not just where we are today.")
3. The ability to control time and to use it constructively.
4. The ability to set goals and to achieve them.
5. The ability to negotiate with the circumstances of living and working.
6. The ability to accept stress, pressure, and momentary insecurity.
7. The ability to communicate with yourself and with others.
8. The ability to motivate yourself into positive action. ("Self-control, self-mastery")

Except for the first of these, each is considered in the format of the goal sheets and the weekly feedback sheets.

Reasons for Using a Goal Sheet

When a person does not know what to do but feels the need to do something, he is probably getting ready to make a mistake. Aimless, random activity almost never produces a desirable result. A marginal college student who fumbles and muddles through his first semester is not likely to do as well as

an equally talented and prepared student who knows just what he wants to do every day for each of his classes. Thus, goals are necessary, especially for the marginal student. And, those goals are far easier to keep in mind and to review and revise if they are written.

A goal sheet keeps the student notified of what he is trying to do and, by doing so, alleviates some of his frustration.

Brief Guidelines for Teaching the Writing of Goals

We cannot spend much time in our remedial reading classes on the writing of goals. For the sake of simplicity, we can teach our students to write goals which meet these criteria: 1. The goal presents a definite, productive way to deal with a challenge or problem. 2. The goal is small enough that we know that we can do it in the time available. 3. The goal is definite enough that we know whether we have met it.

Of course, our remedial students will need a bit of practice and feedback on writing goals to meet these guidelines. That practice must apply to their own purposes for their own classes and not be just practice on writing goals for some hypothetical freshman. The goals must fit the student's perception of his own needs, and there is no better time to make that point than when the student starts writing goals.

Purposes of the Parts of the Weekly Goal Sheet

The weekly goal sheet breaks the week's school work down into manageable hunks, reminds the student of the importance of managing time, gives the student a record of his own feeling of satisfaction, teaches that accomplishment involves stress and pressure, and, when kept as part of a series of records, gives the student a record of his goals for his courses for the whole semester.

The goal sheet (see Illustration 1) covers five days, Monday through Friday. The weekends are not on the goal sheet for two reasons. First, the marginal student does not think of weekends as having anything to do with school. To suggest that going to college is a seven-day-a-week job is to intimidate or to alienate the marginal student. The second important reason why the goal sheet covers only five days is that goals are much easier to generate for days involving tests and homework and lectures and labs. Real guidelines have been provided by the student's instructors and are easy for the student to modify.

Because meeting goals requires time, a slot appears for the time used for the goals for every course for every day. The student may record either how long each goal takes to complete or the times during which he completes the goal. The chief thing is that he is repeatedly reminded that his time must be planned and used for definite purposes.

The goal sheet is set up for five courses. This number is used because few marginal students carry more than five courses, but if anyone does, he could add a goal sheet. Goals are to be written for every class, every day, so that the student keeps abreast of all his courses. The daily planning and work reinforces the idea that diligence is a key to success in college.

The directions at the top of the goal sheet, to add an X if completed goal brought satisfaction and to add a check mark if the completed goal involved stress or pressure, are to encourage the student to note his accomplishments and to remind him that stress accompanies effort, but that both are involved before there can be a payoff.

The goal sheet teaches the student several of the traits which mark the self-assured person. It teaches him to control and to use time, to set and to achieve goals, to negotiate with circumstances by altering his goals and the amounts of time it takes to reach them, to accept stress and pressure.

By breaking the work for his courses into small hunks, it helps him to push himself into action. Finally, at the end of a week or a month or a semester, the student can look back over his goals, remember what he has attained, and appreciate all that he has done. He can develop pride in his effort by seeing, in "the big picture," what his goals add up to.

And, most important of all, the creation and attainment of the goals lets the student feel just as any other person feels who successfully sets and reaches his goals. The student knows how it feels to "win" at something closely related to his studies. If he is a marginal student, this success may sustain his work on his first semester.

Examples of Student Work on a Weekly Goal Sheet

Because the goals need to be small enough to be accomplished in one day, they can be stated briefly. Let's consider what a student might set as his goals for one day, a Monday. His courses are Spanish, English Composition, physical education, art appreciation, and geology. He has a chapter in Spanish this week which gives thirty vocabulary words and five rules for sentence structure and punctuation. Thus, a good goal for Monday would be to learn six vocabulary words and one of the rules. A theme is due in English on Friday morning, so Monday's goal is to pick out a topic and narrow it. In physical education, he may need to reread the section in his handbook on how to keep score in tennis. In art appreciation, he might review the text passage assigned for Tuesday. In geology, he could spend an hour after supper viewing a slide-tape program in the learning resources center on commercially mined ore samples.

Not one of these goals would take long to finish, but each is definite, productive and conspicuously either done or not done.

Student: _____

WEEKLY GOAL SHEET

Add an X if completed goal brought satisfaction.

Add a ✓ if completed goal involved stress or pressure.

DATE	COURSES:				
Monday					
Times					
Tuesday					
Times					
Wednesday					
Times					
Thursday					
Times					
Friday					
Times					

Illustration 1

Reasons for Using a Weekly Feedback Sheet

The weekly feedback sheet facilitates both control and focus. When we become explicit about our feelings, we begin to control them and perhaps even learn from them. If we are confused about some part of a process and we generalize our confusion, we believe that we are confused about the whole project, or, perhaps, about things in general. For example, if we have trouble deciding who has the right-of-way in an intersection, we might generalize to believe that we are uncomfortable about every aspect of driving a car. Generalization of perception allows any one part to distort the whole. The weekly feedback sheet gives the student enough space to write out his emotions about his feedback--from others and from himself--so that he can make them explicit and thus keep them manageable.

The weekly feedback sheet also helps the student to focus in on what in his procedures needs to be revised. By noting feedback about his separate courses, he can see where the breakdowns are in his meeting his own expectations as well as the expectations of others. He may realize that his teachers' expectations are higher than his own, or that his peers' are quite different from his, or that his parents suggest contradictory or inapplicable views.

If nothing else, the feedback sheets will teach him that he can please himself more often than he can anyone else. When he sets reasonable goals and suits himself in attaining them, he can still be mindful of the force of the feedback from others, but he can also be self-directed. As a result, he can reduce his frustrations by acknowledging the patterns of feedback from others but working for his own purposes.

Reasons for the Parts of the Weekly Feedback Sheet

The weekly feedback sheet (see Illustration 2), like the weekly goal sheet, has one column for each course. It does not, however, have rows for the days,

but rather only two rows, one for recording feelings about meeting goals and another for recording feedback from others.

The columns for the separate courses are to facilitate control and focus. The separate columns set apart the student's notes about his progress in Spanish, English, and geology. Thus, if he does not meet his goals in one course, he has a record that shows him that he is behind in one course. This record will remind him that he is not behind in general, but behind in a specific illustration. A worry or frustration or bit of anger about one course is kept in perspective, in its niche.

There are only two rows for feedback--one from himself and one from others--because only a few pieces of feedback will emerge as meaningful to the student during a week. Most of our feedback from ourselves is canceled by contradictory feedback, repeated, or fleeting. Most of our feedback from others is too vague to classify, offered by persons who are not "significant others," muddied by retroactive inhibition, or so slight as to be considered only as "social strokes." It is circular but accurate to say that we are aware of only what we remember. Filling out a feedback sheet is not taking a memory quiz, but it is, instead, boiling down what stands out in our relationships with others and ourselves as significant.

The weekly feedback sheet, like its partner, the weekly goal sheet, allows the student to feel several of the desirable emotions and to think in some of the ways that self-assured people do. By providing a record, the feedback sheets give "the big picture" and show the student that all interactions are changeable, and even improvable. The fact that the sheet calls for reaction to goals met in a week underscores the importance of using time efficiently, as well as the importance of setting and achieving goals. The feedback sheets will demonstrate that any undertaking involves some stress and some initiative. Finally, the sheet forces the student to consider his own reactions, as well as the reactions of others.

Examples of Student Work on Weekly Feedback Sheet

Students' notes about feedback from themselves and from others will be infinitely varied and variously useful. The variety is born from the diversity of the students themselves and from the unpredictable range of influences on feedback. The usefulness of the feedback varies from nothing to something that shows us the contradictions in our own goals or our unwillingness to spend time often enough to meet those goals or the absurdity of trying to please people when we need not be concerned about pleasing.

Some of the more common feelings about meeting goals are "I have let myself down" or "I met my goal, but it was too small to make me feel that I have really done anything." The reactions to feedback from others range from "My history professor just pretends to be dissatisfied to get us to work harder" to "My roommate tried to cheer me up by pretending that my 74 on my foundations math test was really good."

We will help our students best if we guide them toward writing the most specific comments that they can on the feedback sheet, so that they can control and focus on feedback.

Summary

Weekly sheets for planning goals for courses and for recording feedback can help a student to refine and to appreciate his own efforts. He can develop a "sense of wholeness" about his activities, learn to utilize time, set and reach goals, learn to adapt his goals and activities to changing conditions, accept stress and pressure, communicate with himself and with others, and spur himself into action.

Student: _____ Date:

WEEKLY FEEDBACK SHEET

	COURSES:				
Feelings about meeting goals					
Feedback From Others					

Illustration 2